

The Lease Question: 1873-1874

By S. Robert Powell, Ph.D.

The Delaware and Hudson Canal Company began mining anthracite coal in the village of Carbondale in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Those mining operations were located on the west side of the Lackawanna River. On the east side of the Lackawanna River, the Company laid out streets and sold lots. (Many residents of the east side of Carbondale at the present time have deeds to their properties that were signed by D&H President, Thomas Dickson, and D&H Treasurer, Isaac N. Seymour.)

On the west side of Carbondale, the D&H permitted the men employed in their mines and elsewhere upon their works, if they chose, to build houses for themselves and families upon the surface over the mines, on lands which would otherwise have been unoccupied. The privilege, in the growth of the town in that quarter, was extended, until between two and three hundred acres of land were thus occupied for many years.

In January 1859, an effort was made by the D&H to secure leases from the men with houses over the mines on D&H property, and the following "Notice to Lot Holders" was published in the January 8 and January 15, 1859 issues of the *Weekly Advance*:

"Notice to Lot Holders. / Persons who occupy Lots upon the Property of the Del. & Hud. Canal Co., in this City, which were entered upon before the same were surveyed, and who have entered into no contract, are desired to call at once upon the subscriber and enter into contract therefor. / And others who have entered upon and taken up surveyed Lots, but who have not paid for the same in whole or in part, will please call and settle for the amounts due. /The subscriber can be found at his Office at the Hay Scales. **R. E. MARVINE,** / Agent for the Del. & Hud. Canal Co., / Carbondale, Jan. 8, 1859."

Some leases were obtained as a result of this initiative, but the efforts of the D&H to obtain leases on these properties over the mines were not generally successful. Remarkably, the D&H did not take aggressive action on the lease question at that time.

Trusting in the friendship of the Company, and in their rights of possession, the cheap dwellings at first erected on land above the D&H mines were replaced, to a great extent, by much better ones, and by the 1870s, there was a great improvement in the buildings on these D&H lands.

In the meantime, the men all along clung to the hope and belief that the Company would never disturb them, and especially so since they allowed them to remain in quiet possession over the statutory period of twenty-one years. This possession in many cases extended over thirty years, and in some instances about forty years.

In December 1873, however, the D&H asked the miners and others working for the company to sign leases to the lots on which their houses were standing and which many of them had occupied for years. If they did not do so, they could not work for the D&H any longer.

Not surprisingly, there was strong opposition to that request, and an indignation meeting was held at City Hall. At that meeting, a committee of three was appointed (John D. Tighe, Edward Molloy, and John Killeen) to meet with Superintendent E. W. Weston and obtain his views on the matter.

In the December 6, 1873 issue of the *Carbondale Leader* ("INDIGNATION MEETING," p. 3), we read: "The adjourned meeting assembled again on Thursday evening. The committee reported that Mr. Weston had informed them, that, unless the men who were asked to take leases, did so, they could not work for the Company any longer. He said his orders were to that effect. He hoped, however, the men would do nothing against their own interests. The majority of the men resolved not to sign any leases, and the meeting adjourned."

Work stopped at all mines on Tuesday, December 9, 1873. The question was asked, 'Who has paid the taxes on those lands?' Upon referring to the city assessment records, it was learned (1) that the D&H regularly paid taxes upon 620 acres of land within the limits of the city--590 acres of outlying lands, and 30 acres of coal lands, (2) that the tax upon D&H lands in 1872 was about \$1,900, and (3) that the taxes on these houses on land above the mines were paid annually by the residents of these houses in question.

On January 12, 1874, the committee appointed by the miners to confer with the officers of the D. & H. C. Co. on the land question, went to Scranton with the expectation of seeing and talking with President Thomas Dickson. Regrettably, Thomas Dickson was then in New York City and was not expected to return until the 23rd of January. That being the case, the miners met with Mr. Weston of the D&H coal department. That meeting with Mr. Weston was, from the miners' point of view, a complete waste of time. A scathing account of that meeting was published in the *Carbondale Leader* of January 17, 1874, as follows:

"The Labor Troubles.—The committee appointed by the miners to confer with the officers of the D. & H. C. Co. on the land question, went to Scranton on Monday with the expectation of seeing Mr. Dickson and making arrangements with him for an early adjustment of the existing cause of their idleness, and, if possible, to pave the way for a prompt resumption of labor in the mines around this city. The members of the committee were disappointed when they reached Scranton, for Mr. Dickson was then in New York, and was not expected to be home until about the 23d of the present month. They therefore went to the office of the coal department of the company at Providence, where they had an interview with Mr. Weston, superintendent of the coal department, which lasted for a considerable length of time. The members of the committee returned to Carbondale in the evening, having accomplished nothing satisfactory during their interview with Mr. Weston. On the contrary they claim to have been treated with a great deal of disrespect by that official. They say he was overbearing, mulish, and exceedingly crabbed as to his manner; unreasonable and obstinate as to his conversation; stubborn and unyielding on every point they attempted to discuss with him. They claim that he also flatly denied many things that have been printed as coming directly from Mr. Dickson, even such as were published in letters over official signatures; and that he went so far as to contradict himself in certain respects, and denying his own statements made to these same men on other occasions. One member of the committee considered it his duty to make his language pretty plain in the ears of the high official of the D. & H. C. Co., whose talk and actions to the committee were so overbearing, and he consequently politely informed the said official that Mr. Dickson had previously either told that which was untrue, or

that he, Weston, lied shamefully. We can readily believe that the magisterial superintendent was extremely wroth at the plain language of the bold member of the committee and that his dignity—if it may be called dignity—was touched to the quick. He ascended from his dignified position, however, and came near ordering the plain talker from the office, but did not. Perhaps he took a second thought and came to the conclusion that it would be better to keep as cool as possible while the committee remained. Some dispute arose as to the wording of the leases which had been offered to the squatters to sign, one of the committee claiming that they read one way, and Mr. Weston disputing him. A copy was brought from another room in the office to decide the disagreement. After a great amount of talk the committee took their leave. Mr. Weston is certainly very unpopular among the men in this vicinity, and his conduct toward the committee at the interview on Monday has increased his unpopularity. Of this Mr. Weston may not care; but if we were in his position we should care very much. If he is the crabbed and overbearing man he is represented to be,—though we don't pretend to know anything about him except what we hear—we are inclined to think that another trip to Colorado would be of great benefit to his nerves, and very likely beneficial to his temper and disposition. If he is as obstinate as he is reported to be, it seems to us that he is the ‘wrong man in the wrong place.’ ” (*Carbondale Leader*, January 17, 1874, p. 3)

On December 20, 1873, the D&H mines were still shut down. In the December 20, 1873 issue of the *Carbondale Leader*, we read: “The mines in this vicinity, owned by the D. & H. C. Co., are all idle at present, and will likely remain so for some time to come. The White Bridge Tunnel has been boarded up at the entrance and no one is permitted to enter. The huge Lackawanna breaker—said to be the largest breaker in the world stands grim and silent and deserted, like a dark sentinel at the entrance to the mines. No sounds of busy industry now issue from its blackened enclosure, and the giant structure which, but a short time since, prepared over a thousand tons of coal per day, is now having its winter vacation, to last—no one seems to know how long. The hundreds of willing workers would return to their labors at once, provided the question of leases could be satisfactorily settled; but the present outlook doesn’t seem to favor an early resumption of mining here. The few private mines we have are all working as usual.” (*Carbondale Leader*, December 20, 1873, p. 3)]

At the end of December 1873, D&H President, Thomas Dickson, spoke publicly, via the *Carbondale Leader*, on the lease question. He did so by means of a letter that he wrote to Superintendent E. W. Weston. In the December 27, 1873 issue of the *Carbondale Leader*, we read:

“THE LEASE TROUBLES.—We are led to believe, from the tenor of the subjoined latter of President Dickson to Superintendent Weston, that the local difficulties now existing between the D. & H. C. Co. and a large number of miners and laborers in this city, are in a fair way of being amicably adjusted before long. A meeting of the men was held in the City Hall on Monday evening, when a committee was appointed to call on Mr. Dickson. Accordingly, the committee called on him on Tuesday, and his remarks to the members of the committee are said to have been substantially the same as those contained in his letter. Another meeting of the miners was called this afternoon, Friday. The following is the letter: / **PRESIDENT’S OFFICE, / DELAWARE & HUDSON CANAL CO., / SCRANTON, December 22, 1873. / MR. E. W. WESTON, SUPT.**—*My Dear Sir:* I have been greatly surprised at the opposition manifested at Carbondale to our plan of placing lot-holders under lease, and cannot but think that it arises from a misapprehension of our object and aims, and from the interference of outsiders who misrepresent us. That there may

be a full and complete understanding, I will state briefly our position, which you may communicate to all interested. / First. The requiring of leases from parties who are in possession of our lands is not new, but has been the practice for more than fifteen years, and if not fully carried out, the fault is with the officers of the company, whose instructions were positive. / Second. In taking leases the rent is merely nominal, and the lessees have the right or option of purchase when the lots are offered for sale. And as it may be claimed that undue advantage in making the price might result in, you may establish the rates at one; making them so moderate that reasonable exceptions cannot be taken. Indeed, I would have no objection to having three disinterested citizens establish a schedule of prices. / Third. There is neither disposition or intention to claim, or in any way interfere with improvements. And our record in the past is guaranty that all equities will be fully respected in the future. / Fourth. In suspending employes who decline to recognize our rights, we simply do an act of justice to those who have purchased or leased lots in the past, and assert the rights of our stockholders—the owners of the property. / When these facts are understood, and when the additional value given to property by the settlement in question of title is fully considered, it hardly seems possible there can be any valid objection to our course. I trust, therefore, that this explanation will be satisfactory to our employes, that they will assent to our reasonable request, that work may be resumed, and that the harmony and good feeling which have heretofore existed, may be continued, is the earnest desire of / Yours very truly, / THOS. DICKSON, President." (*Carbondale Leader*, December 27, 1873, p. 3)

Thomas Dickson's honest, positive, straightforward, compassionate, and conciliatory management style, which is clearly expressed, not only in that letter to E. W. Weston but also in all his interactions with colleagues and customers during his presidency of the D&H, was very popular with all concerned, and went a long way to persuade others of the justice and the wisdom of the D&H position. In Samuel Logan's *The Life of Thomas Dickson*, we read: "He bound his fellows to himself and to his schemes of industry by genial fellowship and good cheer. Under all circumstances he manifested justice, honesty, and fair dealing with others. As long as he lived his buoyancy of spirit never failed him. He treated those with whom he was connected in business or in social life as equals and associates. He always treated his subordinates as his friends; always personally received them as his equals. . . He died beloved of all who worked with him or under his direction." (Logan, pp. 57-60)

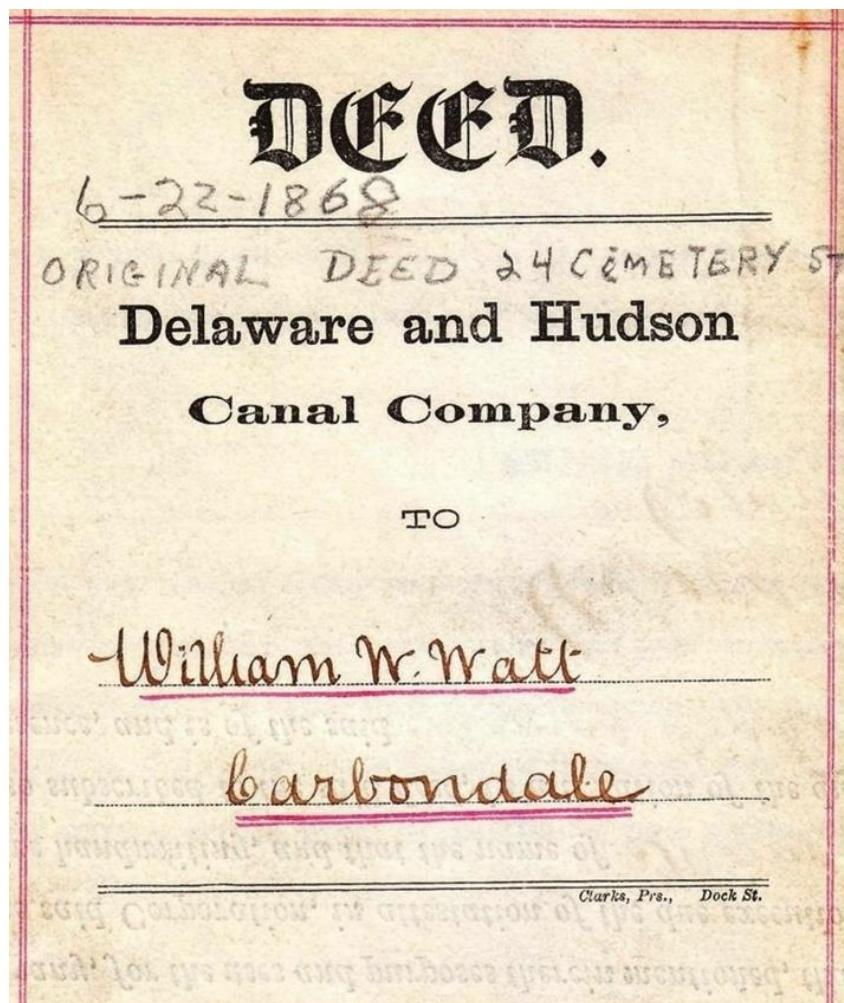
On Monday, January 12, the miners, some of whom had signed leases, began going to work again (in the Mill Drift and Midland levels). These miners, it was reported, were mainly those who had formerly worked in these mines. Some of them signed leases previous to going to work, while others have houses not on the disputed property, but elsewhere.

By the end of January 1874, the "land difficulty" in Carbondale was largely resolved in Carbondale, with the resumption of mining imminent: "There now seems to be a fair prospect of a prompt settlement of the land difficulty in this city, and a resumption of mining will, so we are informed, soon follow. We understand that a number of contracts have been entered into during the past few days between the agents of the Company and the occupants of the land which has been the cause of so much discussion of late. The contracts give the occupants the privilege of buying the land and paying for it in annual installments. It is the belief of some that work will be resumed by the first of February, but we have no reliable authority for saying that such will be the case. We only hope it may be." (*Carbondale Leader*, January 24, 1874, p. 3)

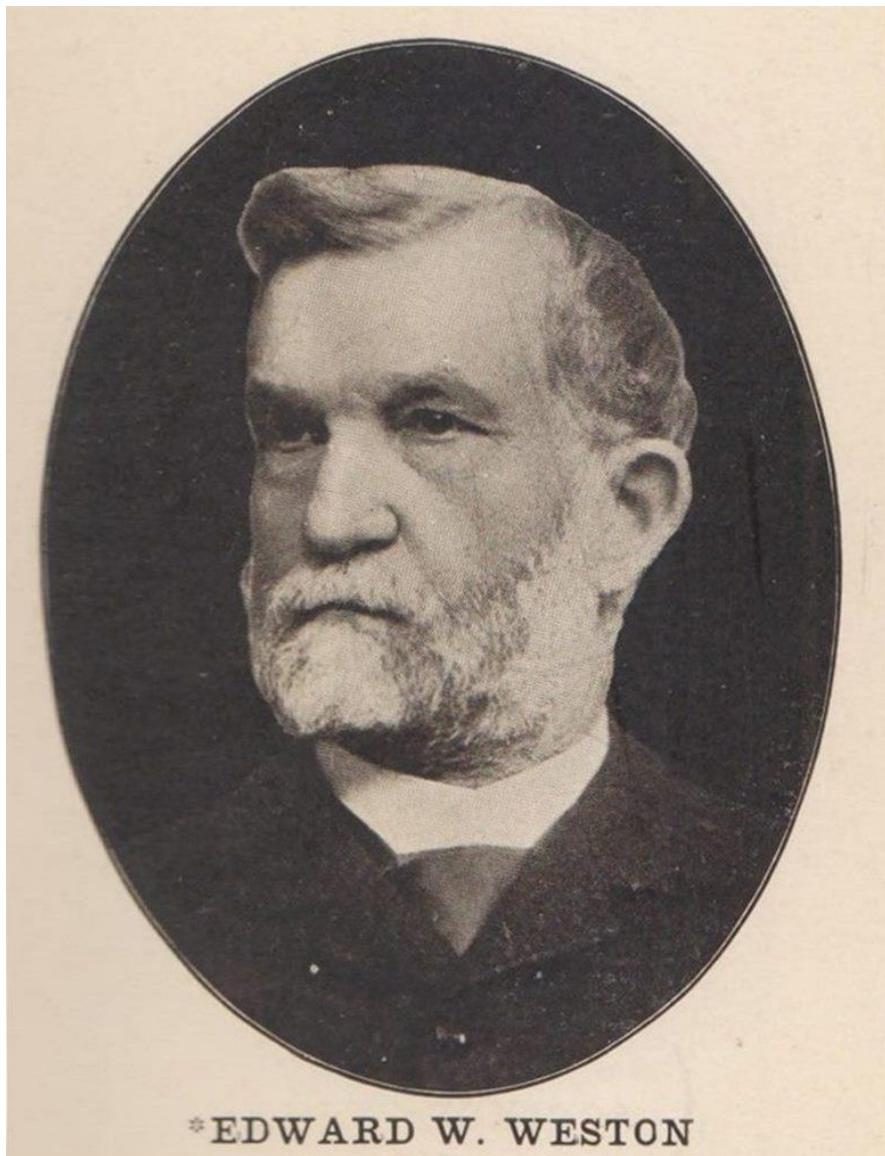
On January 31, 1874, it was announced in the *Carbondale Leader* (p. 3) that the difficulties between the D&H and the miners on the question of leases were amicably settled and that work in the mines would soon be resumed.

And so, thanks to the enlightened managerial style of Thomas Dickson, the lease problem, to the complete satisfaction of all concerned, was solved. Most importantly, in solving that problem, there were no losers. Everybody won.

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Detail of the deed, dated June 22, 1868, from the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company to William W. Watt, 24 Cemetery Street, on the east side of Carbondale. This deed is signed by D&H President Thomas Dickson and D&H Treasurer, Isaac N. Seymour. The properties in Carbondale that were the subject of the lease discussions in 1873 and 1874 were all on the west side of Carbondale.



*EDWARD W. WESTON

Edward W. Weston, 1823-1891, served as the General Mining Superintendent, and then as the General Real Estate Agent of the D&H. When a delegation of the residents of Carbondale's west side went to Scranton to discuss "the lease question" with D&H officials there, they met with Edward Weston and, they reported, "they were treated with a great deal of disrespect by that official. They say he was overbearing, mulish, and exceedingly crabbed as to his manner; unreasonable and obstinate as to his conversation; stubborn and unyielding on every point they attempted to discuss with him."



In June, 1831, under the direction of Archibald F. Law, the first D&H mining engineer, the D&H opened in Carbondale the first deep underground anthracite shaft mine in America. That mine was located just west of the D&H Seventh Avenue crossing in Carbondale. In this photo, taken in 1961, looking west, to the right of the roadway, stands the D&H mine monument in its original location.

The
D&H
The First
Underground Anthracite
Mine Opened Here
June 1831.
By Archbald Law
First Mining Engineer
of
The Delaware and Hudson
Canal Company
John Wurtz, Pres.
John P. Williams, Treas.
Officers of
The Delaware and Hudson
Company 1901.
Robt. M. Olyphant, Pres.
F. M. Olyphant, Secty.
C. A. Walker, Treas.
C. C. Rose, Supt. Coal Dept.
Erected 1901
The Fiftieth Anniversary
of the
City of Carbondale.

Text on the plaque on the monument in Carbondale on the site of the first deep underground anthracite shaft mine in America.